

VZCZCXRO0651
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHKU #0795 1400917
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 200917Z MAY 07
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9167
RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS KUWAIT 000795

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SUBJECT: PUBLIC OUTCRY OVER RESTRICTIVE PRESS DIRECTIVE

¶1. The newly-appointed Minister of Information Abdullah Al-Muhailbi hastily withdrew a set of directives issued last week that outlined new restrictions on what newspapers can publish. The ministry u-turn came after the Kuwait Journalists Association (KJA) condemned the measure, called an emergency meeting, and vowed publicly to defend press freedom by fighting the new restrictions.

¶2. The directive was delivered last week to the KJA in the form of a memo from the Ministry. It contained a list of some 25 restricted topics for which the Kuwaiti media would have to obtain Ministry of Information approval prior to publishing. According to editors who saw the memo, its list of restricted material included interviews with "Islamists," reports of public gatherings, stories on witchcraft, interviews with citizens on foreign policy, and any material on the Ministries of Interior, Health, Education and Social Affairs and Labor. Two days after it was delivered, the Minister spoke by telephone with KJA Chairman Ahmad Behbehani and agreed to withdraw the memo, which he said was issued not by him, but by MOI Director of the Press Fahah Al-Ajemi. The Minister was quoted the next day in the press as saying that he seeks to expand "responsible press freedom" in accordance with Kuwait's press and publications law. He said that he withdrew the directive in order to see whether it violated the press law.

¶3. The KJA, on receiving the directive last week reacted decisively. They called an emergency meeting of its leaders and lawyers and vowed to resist any effort to curb press freedom. The Kuwaiti press made the issue front-page news for two days following the memo's release and subsequent withdrawal. KJA leaders, editors, reporters and columnists reacted by unanimously condemning it in print. One popular female columnist best crystallized the issue by describing the directive as an attempt to restrict the freedom to publish "a view that might oppose an official one." She then goes on to sarcastically describe the Ministry's efforts as an attempt to make people "mute suffering spectators who do nothing other than observe, agree and applaud . . . no matter what degree of harm [government policy] might inflict upon them."

¶4. Media insiders agree that the memo likely originated not from the Minister, but from his Press Director Al-Ajemi in an effort to gain favor with the new Minister. However, in light of Al-Muhailbi's statement that he is keen to expand "responsible" press freedoms, contacts believe he nonetheless supports the content of the memo. They are convinced that the new minister would like to see more restrictions placed on the Kuwaiti media. This comes at a time when the KJA is actively organizing journalists to promote a change in the press law to remove ambiguously worded restrictions and allow for greater press freedom.

¶5. Comment: With battle lines emerging between the KJA and the Minister, the rescinded memo was just a skirmish. The first battle could come as early as next month when the KJA conducts a MEPI-funded workshop to develop draft legislation for amending the

current press law. While the Minister has publicly stated his support for press freedom, he is most unlikely to receive with favor a public proposal to amend the current law. End comment.

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LEBARON